

NEWS RELEASE

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Physical Activity Is Essential for Healthy Children ***Public Health Week in North Dakota Focuses on Healthy Communities and Healthy Children***

BISMARCK, N.D. – In conjunction with *Public Health Week*, the North Dakota Department of Health is reminding parents that a healthy child is a physically active child.

Gov. John Hoeven recently signed a proclamation declaring April 3 through 9, 2006, as *Public Health Week* in North Dakota. The focus of this year's campaign is the impact of healthy communities on the health of children.

"Unfortunately, our children are less active today than they were a generation ago," said State Health Officer Terry Dwelle, M.D. "As a result, we are seeing an increase in the number of our children who are overweight and obese. It's up to all of us – parents, schools and communities – to help our children choose physical activity, good nutrition and other healthy behaviors."

The 2005 North Dakota Youth Risk Behavior Survey indicated that about 28 percent of the state's seventh and eighth graders are either overweight or at risk for becoming overweight, up from 25 percent in 1999. In addition, the percentage of seventh and eighth graders who exercised or participated in regular, vigorous physical activity has dropped from about 80 percent in 1999 to 73 percent in 2005.

Governor Hoeven's *Healthy North Dakota* initiative focuses on the importance of healthy living and healthy communities by challenging the state's citizens to take control of their health – to exercise more, to eat a healthy diet, to examine their use of tobacco and alcohol. The initiative provides the framework supporting North Dakotans in their efforts to make healthy choices by focusing on wellness and prevention anywhere people live, learn, work and play.

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According to the Department of Health, parents, school and communities can have a positive effect on the physical activity of children:

- Because parents have an enormous impact on the health of their children, it is important that they model healthy behavior. Parents are encouraged to be active with their children by riding bike or taking walks together, swimming, sledding, playing outdoor games, etc.
- Schools play an important role in creating healthy environments for children. Beginning this fall, all schools that participate in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's school meals programs are required to establish a local wellness policy. Components of the policy include nutrition education, physical activity, school-based activities and community involvement.
- It's important for communities to provide environments that encourage children to be physically active. Safe and appealing playgrounds, safe routes for children to walk to school, bike and walking trails, and public swimming pools all help children make healthy choices.

"Children who learn to make healthy choices when they are young grow up to be healthy adults," said First Lady Mikey Hoeven, spokesperson for *Healthy North Dakota*. "By encouraging children to eat healthy foods and be physically active, we all are helping to build a healthy future for them and a *Healthy North Dakota* for us all."

For more information about the importance of physical activity, contact Colleen Pearce, Division of Nutrition and Physical Activity, at 701.328.2496. For information about *Healthy North Dakota*, contact Melissa Olson, *Healthy North Dakota* director, at 701.328.2372.

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